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**Strategic Estimates – A Historical Lesson
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On 29 February 2008, the Washington Times published a story alleging a major intelligence debate between the Pentagon and ODNI over the threat posed by China's military buildup. The dispute, according to the Times, is between military analysts who see China's buildup as a major threat to the region, and ODNI analysts who argue that China's expanding military is a normal extension of its growing political and economic power, not a harbinger of war.

Whatever the merits of the story, intelligence disagreements over major foreign powers' strategic intentions are nothing new. The 1970s saw perhaps the most important, but under-reported, intelligence debate of the Cold War over the Soviet Union's accelerated strategic arms program. By the mid-1970s, the Soviets had developed the SS-9 and SS-11 ICBMs, expanded and improved their force of ballistic missile submarines, and upgraded their conventional forces with a new tank (the T-72) and superior tactical air assets (such as the MiG-25 Foxbat). The Soviets also dramatically improved their command and control facilities, hardened their missile silos, and stepped up their civil defense measures.

The question for intelligence analysts in DIA, CIA, and elsewhere was why. Two very different answers emerged. On one hand, DIA and the Services explicitly argued that the Soviets intended to start and win a nuclear war. On the other hand, CIA and the State Department held that the Soviet buildup was only attempting to achieve strategic parity with the United States and limit American intrusion into Soviet affairs. These disagreements surfaced in the process of formulating NIE series 11-3/8, *Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Conflict through 1980*.

The 1976 iteration of NIE 11-3/8 followed CIA's argument, but in a firm dissent, DIA contended that "The Soviets do in fact see as obtainable their objective of achieving the capability to wage an intercontinental nuclear war ... and survive it with resources sufficient to dominate the postwar period." The 1979 NIE, which was written almost exclusively by DCI Stansfield Turner, concluded that "These Soviet programs are to strengthen the USSR's deterrent, to support its foreign policy, and to foster strategic stability through Soviet advantage." DIA and the Services totally dissociated themselves from the NIE, arguing that it "fails to satisfactorily explain the comprehensive nature of Soviet strategic planning involving both offensive and defensive systems."

So who was right? The answer is more complex than it would immediately appear. Soviet documentation released in the 1990s indicates that the Soviet Union was in fact attempting to achieve strategic parity because it feared the U.S. nuclear advantage. However, DIA's position was adopted by policy makers in the Reagan Administration and was one of the causes of the Reagan arms buildup, which bankrupted the Soviets when they attempted to keep up and hastened the collapse of their government.

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Today's historical context is quite different than in the late 1970s, but the key intelligence debate of that era offers some perspective on those of today. Honest disagreements are a normal part of the intelligence process. Which side policy makers choose to support often depends on a variety of independent factors, and definitions of right and wrong are not always clear-cut when it comes to strategic estimates. They are all lessons worth remembering today.

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